

A Ph.D. Student's Anxiety about his Qualification Exam for the Ph. D. Degree

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I met David on Jan. 19, 2014 Saturday. David has a job currently but he also takes time to study his Ph. D program. This year is his 5th year in this Ph. D. program and he is worried about qualifying exams. He is full of anxiety when he thinks about the test. He consults me, hoping that I can provide him with some advice to eliminate his test anxiety.

In the beginning of our counseling session, I introduced Logic-based Therapy to David. We talked freely about all kinds of career issues. As I went through the same kind of Ph. D. studying process, it was easy for me to relate to the topic and I described my similar experiences. The tempo and speed of discussion went smoothly and comfortably. I took some time to understand more about David's thoughts about the Ph. D. qualifying exams, so I could help him to adequately assess them.

We talked about why he's been so worried about the test. David mentioned that the test might take the whole day. In order to understand his real problem about the test, I tried to ask some questions to know his understanding about this Ph. D. qualifying exam.

"How many subjects for this qualifying exam?" I asked.

"There will be two subjects." David said.

"Are these two subjects related to your study and research?" I further asked.

"Yes and one subject of the test may take the whole day so I am so worry about it."
David answered.

"Why?" I further asked.

He mentioned. "From my past experiences, it only takes almost one hour for me to answer all the questions. It will be difficult to imagine why the test needs to take the whole day."

"Are you sure the test will take the full day? Have you checked with the Department office about this information?" I asked.

David showed hesitation to my question and said. "I will check with the department assistant for administration issues again."

He further said. "In the past, the longest time I took for the exam was one hour with my best efforts to answer all those questions. I am so worried that I will fail the test as some seniors did not pass the test."

“Is there any reference on the scope of this qualifying exam?” I further asked.

“My senior in our Department has given me some advice about how to prepare for the test. He said the reference provided by the department only can serve as a basic reference. They suggest using one textbook as basic and extending my study with other books.” David answered.

That is excellent information. I echoed this positive information. As David is still worried about the scope of the test being quite big, I further asked, “If there is any test bank he can refer to?”

He answered “yes.”

David again indicated that he is concerned about not having a good score on the qualifying exam as he used to give a brief answer and finished the test in such a short time. So when the examiner compares his answer sheet to other students, he is afraid he will fail the exam. I then asked David to review the tests he went through before and told me the result of the test. “I have been doing fine on those tests,” David said.

Nevertheless, David kept thinking that, if he does not answer the questions on the test for more than three hours, no matter how well he has been prepared for the test, he will not pass the test. I wanted David to look at the test from different perspectives. “What is the key and essence to getting a good score in answering the questions on the exam? Won’t the examinee who answered the question to the point get a higher score than those who remain in the classroom to finish the exam?”

David gave me a sincere smile and agreed, “The quality is more important than quantity.” However, this bit of sunshine did not last very long. Again, he showed deep concern. He said, “I don’t know how to satisfy the examiners and get a good score.”

I used two approaches to take care of this concern. First, I tried to let David understand which part in the exam is the portion he can be in control of, such as knowing the possible name list for drafting the test content of qualifying exams; and trying to collect some information regarding their favorite test samples and requirements in academic research. Also, he needs to know the standard of answering format and be well prepared prior to the test. Second, there’s an aspect of the test beyond his control such as the subjective part of giving the score, which is not possible for the examiner to avoid. However, normally this subjectivity won’t be critical for deciding a pass or failure for the qualifying exam.

Also, we discussed time management as David is currently working and studying for the Ph. D. at the same time. “How do you arrange your time between work and study in the school? How’s your semester performance?” “The schedule of the class is pre-arranged so I was able to perform well. However, the qualifying exam is different from the class with weekly arrangement, so I feel worried with anxiety,” David said. He also conveyed the worry that there will be some evaluation and judgment coming from his friends and family. He declared, “I will be considered a loser if I failed the test.”

【Emotion(anxiety)=Object (failing the qualifying exam)+ Rating (I will be a loser)】 Formula

(Rule) If O then R, if I fail the qualifying the exam, I will be a loser

(Report) O Fail the qualifying exam

(Conclusion) R I am the loser

Rule : If I fail the qualifying exam (O), then I will be a loser(R)

Report : Fail the qualifying exam(O)

Conclusion : I'm a loser (R)

David thought that failing a Ph. D. qualifying exam means that he will not be able to receive his Ph. D. If he cannot be awarded the Ph.D., he is worried about other's judgment about his having spent so much time and effort and still not getting the degree.

I explained to David, not getting a Ph.D. does not mean he is a loser. There's plenty of stuff and activities in life we can pursue with meaning. For example, he's been doing well to balance his work and study. Also, others' evaluation and judgment are beyond our control. We cannot demand that all others approve and appreciate our achievements. It seemed that David was also engaging in "Catastrophic Reasoning" when thinking that failing the qualifying exam will lead to failure in getting the Ph.D. and loss of his career in the future. In addition, he was "Oversimplifying Reality" when he referred to others' failing experiences. Another's failure does not mean David will fail the test as there are plenty of others who passed the test without problems. I suggested to David, he might talk to some senior Ph. D. program students who passed the qualifying test. They may be able to provide some valuable information including scope of questions, how to prepare for the test in advance, the technique of writing the answers, and time management during the test. So he can throw away those suspected problems and the induced anxiety. Also, I asked David to work out an Action Plan. I shared with him the most famous teaching of Chan Buddhism: "Living in the present," encouraging David to train his persistence. I admonished him not to worry too much about the uncertain future or lament the unchangeable past. By being well prepared for whatever challenge in advance, he will be able to cultivate his courage. Although there's a possibility of failing the test the first time, if he did fail, he is still able to experience the failure and work harder to improve his capacity to pass the exam the next time.

1. In this practice session, what have you learned?

I have learned to use the five steps of LBT (Step1:Identify the Counselee's Emotional Reasoning, Step2:Identifying any Irrational premises, Step3: Refuting the Counselee's Irrational Premises, Step4: Finding an Antidote to the Refuted Premises, Step: 5 Exercising Willpower in Overcoming Cognitive Dissonance) to resolve the problems of the client.

I was able to analyze the problems of the client and grasp the key points bothering him mentally. Also, I got the chance to work with the client, knowing the reasoning and mechanism of his emotional state. Also, we were able to find out what were the irrational assumptions behind his perplexity. By sharing some valuable references of wisdom obtained from philosophy, the client is provided with different perspectives for reframing his original, irrational thinking. With persistence and rational thinking, the client can reduce or eliminate a perplexing problem. I also got the chance to review my personal emotional reasoning on those related issues.

2. Will you do anything different on the next practice?

As this was the first time I applied LBT to conduct in a counseling session, I was not proficient on every dimension. Moreover, due to the time constraints, I felt sometimes that I was too focused on whether I was following all the procedures and steps. So maybe I did complete all recommended procedures but this also affected somewhat the quality of my active listening. I was not sure if I might have missed hearing some important information. If I get more practice in the future, I will be more familiar with procedures so I can conduct the counseling session with greater fluidity.

3. What has the client learned in this counseling?

The client and I discussed whether there is any advantage or disadvantage of this counseling. The client indicated that, talking through his perplexity did help stabilize his emotional state. He felt the counselor was actively listening to his problems and controlled the time and process well. Also, the counselor did spend some time exploring his problem by using the methodology of phenomenology so the counseling could really get to the core of the client's problem.

We both also agreed that, due to time constraints, although the five steps of LBT were covered in the session, each step did not receive as much coverage as we would have preferred. For example, the irrational premise about the client being a "loser" was not fully addressed and analyzed. If there was more time, we might have been able to discuss the definition of success. In addition, more valuable references to different philosophers could have been quoted to serve as possible antidotes.